

CIA operative reportedly lied to Tower prober By NEIL ROLAND

WASHINGTON (UPI) — The CIA station chief in Costa Rica lied to the Tower Commission in January about possibly illegal arms shipments to the Contras, perhaps to protect superiors, sources familiar with the probe say.

A Tomas Castillo, the pseudonym of the CIA official, first told a commission investigator that he assisted only with six deliveries of non-military aid in 1986, which would have been legal, the sources said.

But when pressed later that day, Castillo acknowledged that under the direction of Lt. Col. Oliver North, the former National Security aide, he had coordinated nine arms shipments from a private American network to Contra rebels in the spring of 1986, they said.

At the time, CIA officials were banned by Congress from providing military aid to the Contras but were permitted to share intelligence.

The station chief's false testimony raises questions as to whether he was "lying to protect superiors" who may have authorized the weapons drops, sources said.

A special prosecutor investigating the Iran-Contra arms scandal is examining Castillo's role in passing intelligence and instructions to the private American network in El Salvador as it prepared to airdrop arms to rebels in Nicaragua.

A In a previous investigation of Castillo's pro-Contra efforts last fall, the station chief lied to the CIA's inspector general's office in denying that he had assisted with weapons drops, acting CIA director Robert Gates has told Congress.

A Castillo has told intelligence associates that his activities in Costa Rica were authorized by Allan Fires, the pseudonym used by the head of CIA's Central American operations. He also testified to the Senate Intelligence Committee early this year that he had cleared his efforts in advance with unnamed superiors, a source said.

Fires testified to the Senate Intelligence Committee last year that he did not approve Castillo's participation in the arms drops, one source said. But some committee members believe that Fires "did not disclose everything that was going on," this source said.

Sources said they had no evidence to suggest that CIA officials told Castillo to lie to an investigator with the presidential Tower Commission, which issued its report Feb. 26. The report contains no reference to Castillo's lying.

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"Castillo at first just repeated the official CIA line," one source said.

The CIA, following its inspector general inquiry last fall, issued a statement denying that any agency officials had participated in the arms drops.

Castillo recanted when Brian Bruh, the chief investigator for the panel, presented him with electronic messages Castillo had written to North about the arms shipments, a source said.

When the CIA learned that Castillo had retracted his testimony in January, it reopened its inspector general inquiry and suspended him in February.

Castillo could be subject to prosecution for lying to Bruh and the CIA inspector general's office on grounds he made a false statement to a federal investigator, a source said.

But Tower Commission member Edmund Muskie, a former senator who said he was unaware of the false statements, discounted this possibility. He said Castillo was "probably just trying to maintain the cover for his covert operation."

Castillo intends to tell congressional investigators examining the extent to which top CIA officials managed Contra aid that his actions were authorized by Fires, a source said. The congressional panels investigating the Iran-Contra affair have granted Castillo limited immunity, and he is scheduled to be interviewed by the committee staff on or soon after April 19.

Fires planned Central America operations in regular meetings with CIA Director William Casey and with an inter-agency group that included North and Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, the source said.

Castillo also kept Casey regularly informed of his general activities, congressional investigators said.